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**'TAKING A LEAD IN LIFE': THE FUNDAMENTALS OF CRIMINOLOGY IN PRACTICE**Lindie Coetzee<sup>1</sup> & Ashwill Phillips<sup>2</sup>**ABSTRACT**

*The notion that Academic Criminology is to a large extent divorced from the practical fields that the subject informs, is not a new concept. Moreover, Criminology graduates seem to be falling into the trap of becoming bogged down in a cycle of reproducing book knowledge, without being able to interpret and use information in practice. This may lead to students entering the competitive labour market without the innovative and creative skills required to meet the challenges in the workplace. For the Department of Criminology at the University of the Free State (UFS), Community Service Learning (CSL) provides the ideal vehicle to reconcile theory on juvenile delinquency with the practical application thereof. Students in their fourth year of study visit the Bloemfontein Secure Care Centre, one of two juvenile detention centres in the Free State Province. Students engage in weekly visits to the Centre in order to present an adapted version of the 'Take a Lead in Life' Programme (a therapeutic programme designed to address problem areas that incarcerated youths encounter) to youths who have had brushes with the law. This on-site practical engagement enables the students to adapt the programme in response to the specific needs of the group they encounter. A process of experiential learning offers students the opportunity to attain a deeper level of learning regarding the phenomenon of juvenile misbehaviour and juvenile crime, whilst also emphasising the rehabilitation and therapeutic aims of the Centre. The integration of juvenile delinquency theory in the service activity, the design of the programme, the difficulties encountered during the pilot phase of the project, as well as the value of practical work for the parties involved (the University, the Department of Criminology, the students, the facilitators, the service partners and the target population) will be discussed. Personal critical reflections on the process by facilitators of the programme will also be included in this article.*

**Key words:** *juvenile delinquency; diversion; community service learning; Mangaung Secure Care Centre; 'Take a Lead in Life' Programme.*

**INTRODUCTION**

According to national policy directives, higher education institutions (HEIs) should align their focus towards community engagement. Service learning that integrates community engagement into the curriculum is an ideal vehicle to achieve this (RSA DoE, 1997: 5). HEIs' agendas have thus shifted towards a more active role in their environment and a focus on the priorities of their society through co-operation with different role-players (O'Brien, 2005: 1-3; RSA CHE, 2004: 19). In response, the University of the Free State (UFS) has embraced service learning as an educational approach, and has embedded community engagement in the curriculum (UFS Community Service policy, 2006: 9).

The resulting policy document suggests that every academic programme should include a service learning module (UFS Community Service policy, 2006: 13). Students enrolled into the Criminology honours programme completed a Human and Societal Dynamics (the majority of honours students) or Bachelor of Arts undergraduate degree. Both degrees have a service learning module integrated into the curriculum and students must complete the module in order to attain their degree.

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<sup>1</sup> Junior lecturer, Department of Criminology, University of the Free State. Email: coetzeel@ufs.ac.za

<sup>2</sup> Junior lecturer, Department of Criminology, University of the Free State. Email: phillipsar@ufs.ac.za

Criminology students in the Honours programme (the fourth year of study) at the University of the Free State complete five modules to attain their degree: Advanced criminological theory, Advanced victimological theory, Sentencing and penology, Juvenile delinquency and a Research module. A service learning component has been imbedded into the Juvenile delinquency module of the programme. This component aims to integrate the theory on juvenile delinquency with real-world experience, and provides students with the opportunity to put their theoretical knowledge into practice.

The ability to internalise and interpret learned theory in real-life situations, and to apply innovative thinking and problem-solving skills, is an absolute necessity in the competitive South African job market.

Developing these skills could be problematic in the traditional academic framework (of lecturing and testing knowledge via written exams). For the Department of Criminology at the University of the Free State— and specifically the authors – Community Service Learning (CSL) is currently the best educational approach to reconcile Criminology theory with the practical application thereof.

#### **DEFINITIONS**

**Service learning:** The UFS Community Service policy (2006: 9-10) defines service learning as an organised and structured educational approach that is credit-bearing and embedded into the curriculum of students. Service activities are decided upon in response to the needs of a community as they correspond with the outcomes of the particular academic programme.

**Reflection:** Is used to link theory and practice and to foster personal growth and social responsibility. Reciprocal teaching and learning takes place in a structured triad partnership between the UFS representatives, the community and the service sector. In essence, the pedagogy of service learning stems from constructivist and experiential learning paradigms (Furco, 2001: 67). Reflection is further defined as a deliberate contemplation of a learning experience, with the examination and interpretation of actions as its aim. Individuals interpret the results and then integrate their acquired understanding in future actions. The learning may also be generalised to their actions in the broader society (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997: 153; Bringle & Hatcher, 1999: 153; Felten, Gilchrist & Darby, 2006: 38-39).

**Juvenile Delinquent:** Refers to any person under the age of 18 who participates in any type of crime, unlawfulness or anti-social behaviour. The roles played by a delinquent in this context may range from being the sole perpetrator, to acting as an accomplice, as well as being an accessory after the fact (Bezuidenhout & Joubert, 2008: 170).

**Diversion:** According to Skelton (in Bezuidenhout & Joubert, 2008: 162; Skelton, 2001) diversion is a process by which youths are steered away from the formal court system into rehabilitative programmes within the community. In this way, children are integrated with their community and family; the relationship between the victim and offender is restored; and the child is dealt with in an individualised manner.

**Aims of Diversion:** In essence, diversion is aimed at addressing the causes and risk factors which facilitate criminality. It teaches youths to take responsibility for their actions, and prevents juveniles from being stigmatised and labelled as offenders. Children who are successfully diverted also avoid acquiring a criminal record (Wood, 2003).

**Advantages of Diversion:** The advantages of this approach are twofold. In the first instance, it reduces the possibility of the child being labelled as a 'delinquent', which could promote further criminality. Secondly, the child's prospects of acquiring legitimate work in future are not affected, as diversion enables the child to avoid the stigma attached to having a criminal record (Wood, 2003).

**Diversion Programmes:** A wide range of formal and informal diversion programmes exist, including: victim-offender mediation, family group conferencing, the Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), the South African Young Sex Offenders Project (SAYStOP), Pre-trial Community Service (PTCS), the Journey programme, a verbal apology to the victim/s, victim compensation and a formal warning issued by the public prosecutor (Bezuidenhout & Joubert, 2008:164-166; Wood, 2003).

### **CONTENT OF THE JUVENILE DELINQUENCY MODULE**

The module deals with the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency, including unlawful behaviour perpetrated by children and youth, as well as all general forms of youth misconduct. The aim of this module is twofold, since it is focused on enriching students' knowledge concerning juvenile delinquency on a theoretical, as well as a practical level. Further aims include the expansion of students' knowledge on juvenile delinquency and youth misbehaviour, as well as enabling them to apply their knowledge in a real-life context. Student assessment is based on seminars presented on designated themes which account for two thirds of their semester mark in the juvenile delinquency module, while the service learning outreach constitutes the remaining third. Seminars cover the following themes:

- The nature and extent of child and youth misbehaviour, and specifically contemporary juvenile crime;
- The social, individual and bio-social criminogenic risk factors;
- Criminal justice system principles and the response to juvenile crime;
- The influence of unique South African socio-economic issues such as HIV/Aids, poverty and unemployment;
- The prevention and control of juvenile delinquency in South Africa;
- Gender-based differences pertaining to juvenile delinquency;
- The influence of anti-social peer groups and deviant subcultures and
- Current policy, practice and future prospects, with specific reference to changes brought about by the Child Justice Bill, as well as the Bill of Rights.

### **THE MANGAUNG SECURE CARE CENTRE**

In circa 2000, the Monument Place of Safety was closed down and the buildings were earmarked for the establishment of a second Secure Care Centre in the Free State province. The Bloemfontein Secure Care Centre was officially opened on 13 July 2007.

The Centre accommodates children in the age-group 14 to 17 years who are awaiting trial for Schedule 2 offence;<sup>1</sup> murder, attempted murder, assault with the intent to cause grievous bodily harm, rape, indecent assault, armed robbery, robbery, housebreaking and theft of items with a monetary value of more than R3 000; and children who are awaiting placement in a reform school (Rossouw, 15 September 2011). The Centre serves the whole of the Free State province.

The Secure Care Centre provides the following programmes, apart from the youths' routine programme:

- i. *Education* through the Tatello Special School, equipped with a principal and three teachers from the Department of Education. A normal curriculum is not followed, owing to the high turnover rate of youths moving through the system. Youths are assessed and placed in a relevant grade. Numeracy, literacy and life skills also receive attention.
- ii. *Weekly services of different denominations* take place on Sundays. Cell groups also exist;
- iii. *Sport* grounds are being developed. A swimming pool is also available. Soccer matches are arranged with Ons Kinderhuis, Tshireletsong and shelters for street children in the Bloemfontein area;
- iv. Dance classes, board games, table tennis and a pool table are available for *recreational* purposes;
- v. There is a vegetable garden, and the youths are responsible for the maintenance of the garden and the courtyard. To date, this has been the only *vocational* programme;
- vi. *Developmental and therapeutic programmes* cover the following themes: Substance abuse, responsible sexuality, anger management and life skills;
- vii. A senior professional nurse is responsible for the following *health programmes*: Health and sexual education, including programmes on HIV/Aids; sexually transmitted diseases; family planning; and general hygiene. Rooms are inspected for cleanliness and general hygiene. The nurse also handles general health-related matters;
- viii. *Social work* programmes include group work, individual counselling and therapy;
- ix. *Occupational therapy* focuses on life skills and other activity programmes; and
- x. Holiday programmes are presented during the school holidays, and National Holidays are also celebrated.

### LINKING THEORY WITH PRACTICE

After eight years' experience in service learning, the authors decided to use service learning as a vehicle to link theory with practice. The activities of the Bloemfontein Secure Care Centre tie in well with the objectives of the Juvenile Delinquency module in the Honours programme. As demonstrated by graphs 1 and 2, offending rates and re-admissions indicate that manifestations of serious offences in Bloemfontein and the surrounding areas are commonplace.

Negotiations with the Mangaung One-stop Justice Centre and the Secure Care Centre were initiated. During the negotiations, we explained the scope of the Criminology Honours programme, as well as the possible link between the Juvenile Delinquency module and the mandate of the Centre. The parties who were present agreed that Honours students could be helpful in presenting the Centre's 'Take a Lead in Life' Programme – a life-skills programme which forms part of the *developmental and therapeutic programmes* mentioned above. Students would receive the opportunity to adjust the programme according to the specific needs of the group of children with whom they happen to be dealing with at any given time. Students were divided into groups, and care was taken to ensure that each group included a member who would be able to communicate in three languages (Afrikaans, English and Sesotho). A male student was also placed in each group for risk management reasons, and a

supervisor was present for further security. The ideal situation would have been to have 12 youths in each group. However, youths regularly move into and out of the Secure Care Centre, owing to cases being dropped or because they have completed their sentence. All possible efforts were made to conclude the programme with a particular group before starting with a new group. Even when most of the group members had left, no new members would be admitted into a particular group. To date, four groups have undergone the programme; and new groups were formed after the October 2011 school holidays.

Students hand in a reflection report after every session. The aim of this is to enable students to explore their individual experience; to integrate theory with the practical application thereof during the session; and to plan ahead for further sessions. Students also hand in a portfolio at the conclusion of the module.

The 'Taking a Lead in Life' programme, as presented in the past, covered the following themes:

- i. An introductory session explaining the aims of the diversion programme and highlighting the consequences and effects of bad choices. In the Secure Care Centre context, this would refer specifically to the consequences and effects of crime for the juvenile;
- ii. The youth's current state of being, in terms of, for example, recent and current perceptions of themselves; good qualities that they currently possess; and qualities that they wished to develop further;
- iii. Breaking the link between learned responses in the past and future behaviours and reactions, with the aim of helping them to learn from their past without being constrained by it, and
- iv. Consolidating the new vision that the youths had developed during the programme and helping them to create the envisioned positive future in the present.

The programme was, however, originally developed to cater to the Mangaung One-stop Child Justice Centre in Bloemfontein which deals with youths who have committed Schedule 1 offences<sup>3</sup> and are diverted away from the formal criminal justice process (Reyneke & Reyneke, 2012:129).

The youths detained at the Mangaung Secure Care Justice Centre committed Schedule 2 and Schedule 3 offences.<sup>2</sup> The Centre population is characterised by a high turnover rate as juveniles move into and out of the Centre due to the charges against them being dropped, placement in a reform school or transfer to an adult correctional Centre (in cases where the youth reaches the age of majority). These circumstances inhibit the flow of the programme as the youths cannot be kept in stable groups throughout.

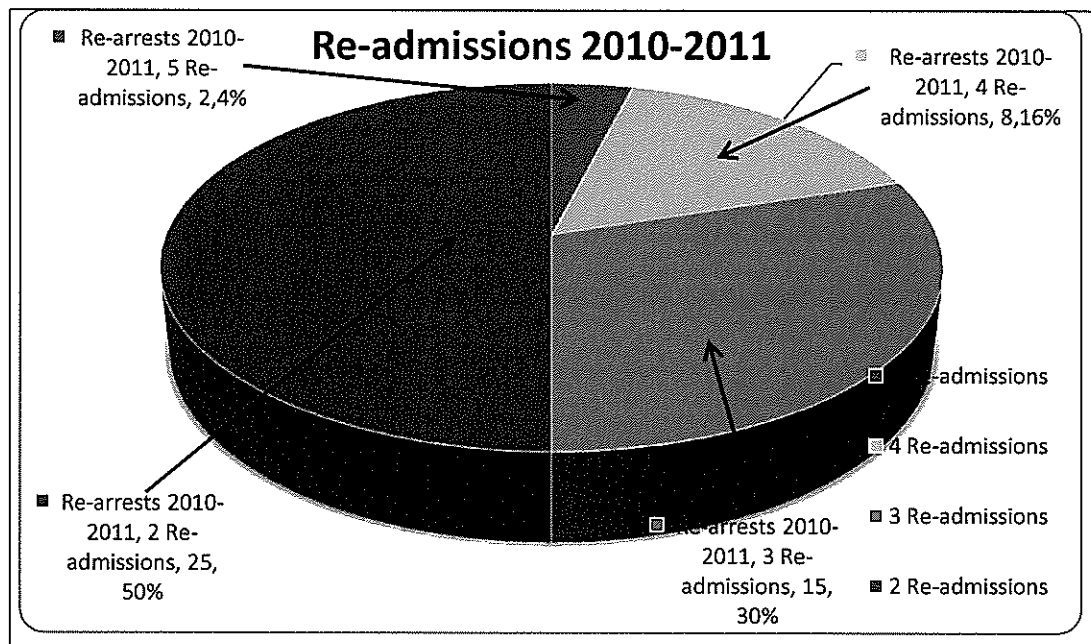
Students therefore adapt the 'Take a Lead in Life' Programme to establish flow and consistency in ever changing group contexts. Each outreach should also reflect aspects of the curriculum content of the Juvenile delinquency module.

**EXTENT OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AT THE MANGAUNG SECURE CARE CENTRE**

Youth offending throughout South Africa is a growing concern, particularly in the Free State. Statistics obtained from Liza Rossouw (2011, personal communication, 20 September) illustrate the extent of the cases handled at the Secure Care Centre, one of two centres in the Free State (the other being Matete Matches in Kroonstad). Figures obtained for the period up to 15 September 2011 reveal that the Centre had 156 new admissions during the 2011 book year. There were eight (8) re-admissions, which means that the Centre processed a total of 236 youths from January to September 2011.

The breakdown of the 50 re-admissions in 2011 is as follows:

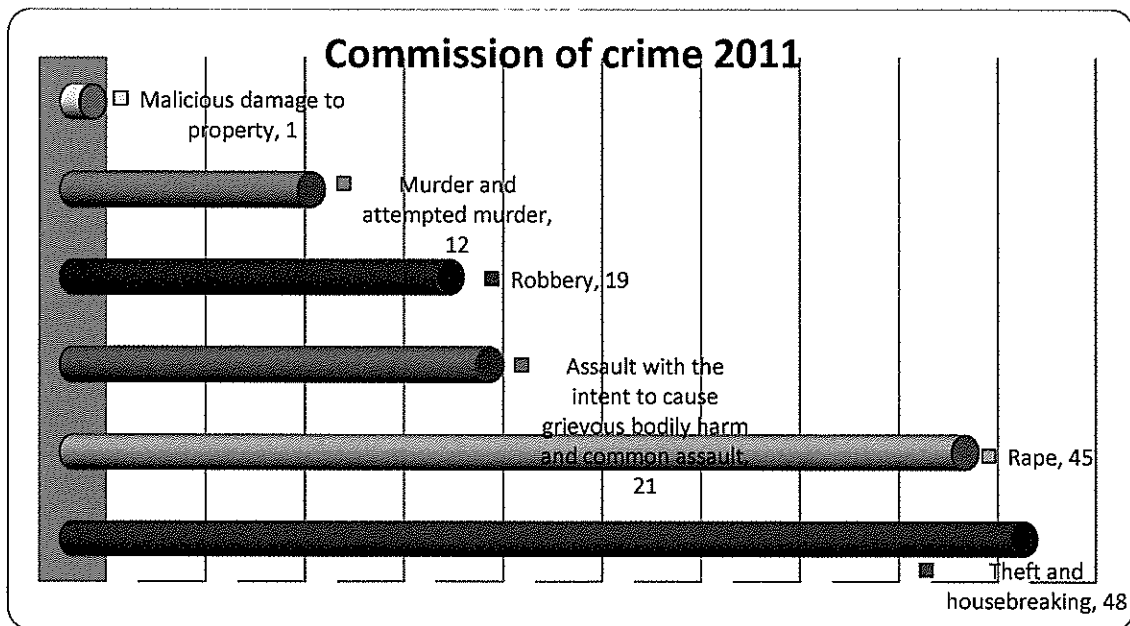
**Graph 1: Re-admissions 2010-2011 (N=50)**



(Rossouw, 20 September 2011)

The figures in Graph 1 can be interpreted as follows. Of the youths who were re-admitted five times, two were re-admitted in 2011 alone. Regarding those who faced four re-admissions, one of the youths had been incarcerated four times in 2011; one was re-admitted three times in that year; and another was admitted on two separate occasions in 2011. Twenty-five youths were admitted for a second time in 2011. Fourteen of these youths were admitted twice in 2011. A breakdown of the crimes committed by the youths who were admitted to the Secure Care Centre in 2011 is as follows:

Graph 2: Commission of crime 2011 (N=146)



(Rossouw, 20 September 2011)

According to the data in Graph 2, theft and housebreaking with 48 offences, closely followed by rape with 45 incidents, comprise the offences most often committed. The figures for assault with the intent to cause grievous bodily harm and common assault with 21 occurrences, and murder and attempted murder with 12 incidences are also alarmingly high. Unfortunately, many of the youths are still awaiting trial; and figures were not available for all the youths who were incarcerated in 2011.

## EVALUATION

### Advantages for involved parties

#### Juveniles

The programme reinforces the aims of diversion by targeting the causes of delinquency and reducing the impact of risk factors which motivate criminality. It provides youths with the opportunity to take responsibility for their unlawful behaviour, to realise the consequences of their actions and to search for ways to repair the harm they have caused. Unfortunately, this does not necessarily reflect the mindset of the incarcerated youth offender. The circumstances of individual cases will have an influence on the outcome as certain youths are already serving sentences while others have not yet had their cases concluded.

Responsible decision-making is promoted and youngsters learn basic skills such as non-violent conflict resolution, goal development, anger management, literacy skills and techniques for effective communication.

Juveniles are exposed to mentors who serve to reduce the influence of delinquent peer groups and gang sub-culture. The ultimate aim is to replace negative role-models with positive role-models who promote socially acceptable behaviour and serve to reinforce social norms and values. Each juvenile receives individual attention and is given the opportunity to build solid relationships with individuals who can function as support systems whenever the child is in a crisis situation. Juveniles are also treated in an individualised manner, since the mentors



(Criminology Honours students) are aware of the fact that the causes and risk factors promoting criminality, differ from one juvenile to the next.

Furthermore, the programme creates the opportunity for juveniles to test reactions to certain types of behaviour, which can then be generalised to societal responses, aiding socially acceptable behaviour. The programme offers children a medium to discuss daily grievances, frustrations and obstacles, thereby promoting socially viable behaviour which is necessary for law-abiding conduct. In addition, life-skills training, career preparation and opportunities for teamwork are made available. Proactive leisure activities are used as a mechanism to sustain rehabilitation, helping children to realise that positive avenues to fun, excitement and 'thrills' are available, and can be just as or more pleasurable than criminal avenues.

### ***Students***

Students gain practical experience and receive the opportunity to apply, test and criticise theoretical knowledge, making the programme an ideal vehicle for every student to establish his or her unique voice (reflection reports are especially helpful in this regard). Students are also provided with career development and networking opportunities, which will be beneficial for the purpose of establishing themselves as Criminologists. Furthermore, students are granted the opportunity to develop time-management skills, commitment, responsibility and a positive orientation to community service, engagement, empowerment and community upliftment.

### ***The UFS Criminology Department, the University of the Free State, and the subject field of Criminology in general***

By integrating the 'Take a Lead in Life' Programme with the Juvenile Delinquency module offered to Honours students, the Department of Criminology at the University of the Free State has been able to succeed in training students more effectively, thereby preparing them more effectively for the competitive job market. The programme facilitates community engagement and service delivery, strengthening the bond between the surrounding community and the University. A paradigm shift towards experiential learning approaches like service learning would, further enriching the already organic milieu of Criminology in South Africa. New teaching strategies could lead to more versatile research contributions in the ever changing South African context.

### ***Facilitators***

Facilitators are presented with the opportunity to engage actively with both juvenile delinquents and the community in general, thereby facilitating the combination of theory and practice. The programme therefore narrows the gap between mere theoretical knowledge and the ability to utilise knowledge in a practical environment. Facilitators are further enabled to develop crucial skills, ranging from communication to the consolidation of their existing knowledge. Organisational skills, time-management, critical thinking abilities, quick-witted problem solving skills, opportunities for networking, further research and teamwork are also cultivated.

### **HINDRANCES AND DIFFICULTIES**

This programme is still in its developmental stages, and as with all new endeavours, teething troubles are bound to occur. Practical challenges include: (i) time constraints, (ii) miscommunication with service partners, (iii) opposition from colleagues, (iv) the University's promotion criteria and the accommodation of service learning in the formula for determining credits awarded to students, (v) the minimal weight accredited to community service, (vi) negative attitudes on the part of both students and juveniles, as well as (vii) a

lack of resources with regard to funds made available for transport, food and other necessary supplies.

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As stated in the introduction, a practical element should, in the opinion of the authors, be built into Criminology programmes. A practical element could also provide networking opportunities and foster civic engagement – not only for students, but also for staff who become involved in service learning (as this was the method chosen as a vehicle to facilitate the link between theory and practice).

Although the method is somewhat taxing in terms of time and manpower, it could also be very rewarding for the involved parties. Academics should not become demotivated if the endeavour is not met with immediate success. Relationships with service providers have to be built and nurtured, and this takes time. Students also battle to distinguish between the concepts of community service and service learning, and become dejected when their activities are linked to assessment. This problem should diminish over time.

It is further necessary to adapt the 'Take a Lead in Life' Programme to meet the needs of the Secure Care Centre and those of the Criminology Department more effectively. The youths battle to understand the aims of the programme, and these aims should be made clearer. It is the authors' opinion that although the 'Take a Lead in Life' Programme does fit the aims of the Bloemfontein One Stop Justice Centre, it falls short in addressing the needs of youths at the Mangaung Secure Care Centre. It seems that the programme would need serious adjustment to be applicable to the needs of the detained youths. Research directed towards addressing the unique circumstances of every young offender, whether he/she is detained for a short or extended period of time, is a necessity. A further complication arises in using a group format in a dramatically changing Centre population. Gaining rapport with the youths is difficult when groups keep changing. It is therefore necessary to involve the total population detained at the Centre at any particular time. If not, youths detained for a short time-frame will receive no benefit from this outreach.

The Centre faced new concerns in 2012. Employees at the Centre were confronted with a brewing gang war, representing community gangs in the Bloemfontein area. Members of the International Junior Portuguese (IJP) and Born To Kill (BTK) gangs are in strong opposition. The two gangs are constantly in skirmishes for dominance, and the process of gaining new recruits has reached violent proportions. The acute problem needs to be addressed, thus necessitating an immediate programmatic response. The ideal of developing a set programme that can be followed annually seems to be too idyllic an aim.

Finally, it is recommended that any interventions in the path of the detainees warrants further research.

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**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> **Schedule 2** offences comprise: public violence; culpable homicide; assault including assault with the intent to inflict grievous bodily harm; arson; housebreaking, robbery and theft where the monetary value does not exceed R20,000; possession of car-breaking and house-breaking apparatus; any offence relating to the unlawful possession of dependence producing drugs; forgery or fraud where the amount concerned does not exceed R20,000; any conspiracy, incitement or attempt to commit any offence referred to in this Schedule; any statutory offence where the penalty concerned does not exceed R20,000. Refer to Act 75 of 2008:sec 53(4).

<sup>2</sup> **Schedule 1** offences comprise: assault where grievous bodily harm has not been caused; malicious damage to property which does not exceed an amount of R500; trespassing; any offence relating to the illegal possession of dependence producing drugs where the quantity does not exceed R500; theft where the value of the property does not amount to more than R500; possession of suspected stolen goods where the value of the items does not exceed R500; loitering with the intention of committing prostitution; any statutory offence where the maximum penalty determined by that statute is a fine of no more than R1,500 or three months imprisonment; and conspiracy, incitement or attempting to commit any offence referred to in this schedule. Refer to Act 75 of 2008:sec 53(3).

<sup>3</sup> **Schedule 3** offences comprise: murder or attempted murder; rape or attempted rape; robbery or attempted robbery with aggravating circumstances; robbery or attempted robbery involving theft of a motor-vehicle; indecent assault involving the infliction of grievous bodily harm; indecent assault on a child under the age of 16 years; any offence related to the illicit possession of or trafficking of dependence producing drugs or any offence relating to exchange control, corruption, extortion, fraud, forgery, or theft, where the amount concerned is above R50,000 or in the case of acting in the execution or furtherance of a common purpose or conspiracy with a monetary value exceeding R10,000; any offence relating to the dealing or smuggling of ammunition, firearms, explosives or armaments; any offence relating to the possession of an automatic or semi-automatic firearm, explosives or armaments; any conspiracy or incitement to commit any offence referred to in this Schedule. Refer to Act 75 of 2008:sec 53(4).